

Sermon – July 5, 2020 (Rev. Glenn Inglis)

The passage from Matthew 11 gives us just a hint of the tension that was brewing with John the Baptist and his followers concerning the status of Jesus of Nazareth. We do not have time to rehearse the whole story, but John – now in prison – was having some doubts about Jesus – was he the real deal or not?

John, cut from the same cloth as Elijah – physically tough, uncompromising, searing eyes – the one chosen by God to declare the advent of the Messiah, the inbreaking of God’s reign on earth – his concerns were serious!

To John, Jesus seems to be doing little about hurrying judgment day – so John sends his followers to ask Jesus – “Are you the Messiah or should we wait for another?” Jesus’ answer, we should note, was not theological, it was not argumentative – “Simply look,” said Jesus, “the blind have sight, the deaf hear, the lame walk – and the poor have good news brought to them.”

Then Jesus says something extraordinary: **John is the greatest human being ever to live – yet the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than him.**

Now to our passage: In the context of John’s questions, Jesus describes his generation as children choosing what game to play.

- Would it be a funeral procession full of doom and gloom with lots of wailing?
- Or, a wedding celebration, with flute and joyous singing?

Well, neither it seems as there was no agreement – so the kids just went home disappointed.

And, Jesus says, so it is with this generation: John comes as the ascetic, the epitome of discipline and rigorous devotion to the law and people say, “He has a demon!”

Jesus comes eating and drinking with poor and rich and in between, and they say, “He is a glutton, a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners”.

You can't please all the people all the time, or even some of the time, or so it seems!

Bud Phillips was a former principal at the Vancouver School of Theology and once told a story about a time when he was doing graduate studies at Boston College. There was a renowned preacher on staff and one of the students, who also had a parish, kept asking this prof to come and preach in his Church. It was a rural parish with old school Yankee stock, a long way from Boston. Finally, the professor gave in and one Sunday showed up in this little rural Church. He preached one of his favourite sermons but got absolutely no reaction from the Congregation. Shaking hands at the door there were polite hellos but no invitation to lunch. Returning to the Vestry, rather dispirited, he was grabbing his jacket from the closet where, behind an old preaching gown, he saw a little sign, obviously left by the former minister. It simply said, Hallelujah Anyway!

Some days are just like that!

People often search for perfect symmetry in the Scriptures; it's like looking for perfect symmetry in a congregation, or community, or nation, or world. The Bible reveals people much like us – a bit saint and sinner – who seem to really like to argue about stuff. And even God, it seems, just can't seem to please all of us.

Some serious disagreements are necessary. This is a Reformation Church – I also come from the same historical tradition. The Medieval Catholic church needed to be reformed. Job done! But we still manage to find things to argue about.

Some are extremely important – such as the status of women or the LBGTQ+ community. Others, I fear, can be rather trivial.

There was a small town Presbyterian congregation in Ontario where the Women's Group had a serious argument about what to serve for luncheons after funerals. It was a lot of work and no one could agree on a solution. So a senior member with some clout simply said this is what will happen:

Funerals for members: Sockeye Salmon Sandwiches

Funerals for adherents: Pink Salmon sandwiches

Funerals for those with no real connection to the congregation: You guessed it, Tuna!

The Pastor may have been ambivalent about the ultimate destiny of the deceased, but the Women's Guild shared no such doubt!

We will take a brief tour over to Paul's dilemma in Romans 7. I confess that I rather enjoy these passages where Paul comes across as a conflicted human being like me and not the paragon of perfection we sometimes make him out to be. It is a most revealing confession and one we can relate to:

***I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do! Wretched man that I am!***

This dilemma of choice can be social: like the children arguing over games; or, like Covid 19, do we socialize or quarantine?

We can experience the same struggle within our own lives. Paul speaks of the mind at battle with the flesh. The law of God and the power of sin.

What is the right thing to do? What is the right way to be in this world as followers of Jesus? And even when we know the right way, will we do it?

From Hosea 11 we learn that choosing the right course is not easy, even for God! The sins of Israel demand God's judgment; God's love for his children demands compassion. What will God do?

***My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
I will not execute my fierce anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath.***

Is that not what Jesus meant when he said, “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds?”

Disagreements are inevitable as you well know. Jesus spent more time than he wanted, I’m sure, in conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees. The disagreements were central to Jesus’ ministry and could not be avoided. But they did not define him – and when he had had enough, he returned to those eager to hear good news.

Paul once had a serious argument with Peter over the place of Gentiles in the Church. There was prayer and Paul won the day yet I doubt that Peter and him were ever good buds, but they respected each other’s gifts and ministries.

Paul later got into an argument with Barnabas over who should accompany them on their journey. The argument was so sharp that they split up – Barnabas and John Mark going one direction; Paul and Silas another. So it goes.

Paul’s disagreement with Peter was critical for the future of the Church.

Paul’s disagreement with Barnabas may have been mere petulance.

We need wisdom to know what is essential to the Gospel of Christ and what is simply a matter of our pride or privilege.

Where does that wisdom, that faithful discernment, come from?

Jesus suggests a way in one of the most beautiful passages in Scripture:

***Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.***

Our world has been beset by a pandemic.

There is a huge movement among the oppressed and forgotten peoples to be seen and heard, to be equal citizens with dignity and rights. Not just tolerated, but affirmed and loved!

God's creation suffers – it has reached 37 degrees in Siberia; Antarctica is melting; there are fires and storms and droughts. There are 80 million displaced people in our world.

These are burdens we all must share.

Yet I fear that the Church in the world is like the children in the marketplace. To the Pharisees of old, as Jesus said, **You tithe mint, dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier issues of the law: justice and mercy and faith.** (Matthew 23:23)

The centre of the Church is no longer Rome or Geneva or Canterbury. The energy of the Church is in Nairobi, Seoul, Sao Paulo. We in the wealthy nations have moved from prophetic proclamation to church maintenance and survival. Ecumenical ministries wither; the World Council of Churches declines; we are hardly noticed by the societies we are meant to serve.

Some of us say, Let's get back to the basics!

Some say, Let's try to invigorate our worship with new music!

Some say, Let's sell our buildings and give the money to the poor!

We can't sing the same song, so we go home disappointed.

We are the hands and feet, the heart and voice of Christ in this world. It is time we discerned Jesus' will for the Church in this age.

Thankfully, Jesus calls us to listen and learn – there is a yoke that is easy which we can bear; there is a burden just right for the energy we have.

And the response is still 'Hallelujah!'

Amen.